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*Form Approved
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 23-04-2008	2. REPORT TYPE FINAL	3. DATES COVERED (From - To)		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Lessons from Significant Foreign Disaster Relief Operations Applied to AFRICOM			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
			5b. GRANT NUMBER	
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) LT Miguel R. Martinez Paper Advisor (if Any): N/A			5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
			5e. TASK NUMBER	
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Joint Military Operations Department Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; Distribution is unlimited.				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES A paper submitted to the Naval War College faculty in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Joint Military Operations Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.				
14. ABSTRACT The establishment of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) puts the forward military presence of the United States in close proximity to a region where the probability of conducting disaster relief operations is high. Analysis of significant foreign disaster relief operations suggests critical lessons for the operational commander. These lessons relate to when a military force should be used in a disaster relief situation, how to use such a force, and how to coordinate efforts with governmental and non-governmental relief agencies. This paper will analyze four significant disaster relief operations the U.S. military has participated in since 1991. The current state of foreign disaster relief policy and doctrine will be analyzed. Conclusions will be drawn from across the case studies and applied to the current situation facing AFRICOM. Finally, recommendations will be made about how to efficiently conduct foreign disaster relief in AFRICOM's theater of operations.				
15. SUBJECT TERMS AFRICOM, Foreign Disaster Relief, Foreign Humanitarian Assistance				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED		17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 22	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Chairman, JMO Dept 19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code) 401-841-3556

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)

**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.**

**LESSONS FROM SIGNIFICANT FOREIGN DISASTER RELIEF OPERATIONS
APPLIED TO AFRICOM**

by

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LT, USN

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: _____

23 April 2008

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ABSTRACT

The establishment of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) puts the forward military presence of the United States in close proximity to a region where the probability of conducting disaster relief operations is high. Analysis of significant foreign disaster relief operations suggests critical lessons for the operational commander. These lessons relate to when a military force should be used in a disaster relief situation, how to use such a force, and how to coordinate efforts with governmental and non-governmental relief agencies. This paper will analyze four significant disaster relief operations the U.S. military has participated in since 1991. The current state of foreign disaster relief policy and doctrine will be analyzed. Conclusions will be drawn from across the case studies and applied to the current circumstances facing AFRICOM. Finally, recommendations will be made about how to efficiently conduct foreign disaster relief in AFRICOM's theater of operations.

BACKGROUND

The United States regularly invest the military into operations in response to natural or man-made foreign disasters. Notable examples since the end of the cold war include Operations Sea Angel, Support Hope, Unified Assistance and Lifeline. Each of these United States military operations was in response to a large scale foreign disaster that threatened to overwhelm global governmental and non-governmental relief agencies. Analysis of these disaster relief operations suggests critical operational-level lessons related to the factor of force and space, the function of logistics, and coordination with civilian relief agencies.

The establishment of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) puts the forward military presence of the United States in close proximity to a region where the probability of conducting disaster relief operations is high.¹ AFRICOM should incorporate lessons from recent disaster relief operations to effectively respond to disaster in the African theater of operations. Specifically, AFRICOM should establish a high threshold defining when U.S. military resources will be used for disaster relief, sea basing concepts should be used to limit the size of the ground force's footprint in the affected area, and the use of AFRICOM's military forces should be limited to support of other governmental and non-governmental relief agencies, mainly by providing logistical capability.

The U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance's three largest responses, and the majority of its budget in 2006, were devoted to Africa.² Given these facts, AFRICOM will need to focus on developing effective and efficient disaster relief doctrine. The complexity and urgency of disaster relief operations means that it is vital that past operations guide future operational planning.

ANALYSIS OF DISASTER RELIEF OPERATIONS

Operation Sea Angel was in response to a massive cyclone that devastated Bangladesh in the spring of 1991.³ Cyclone Marian hit Bangladesh at a precarious time for the Bangladeshi government. The newly installed government was the first civilian government after years of military rule.⁴ As a result, this new civilian governmental establishment was ill equipped to deal with the large scale destruction inflicted by the cyclone. Initial estimates were that 138,000 lives were lost and 2.7 million people were left homeless.⁵ The loss of infrastructure, including roads, railways, and telecommunications was near total in the affected area.⁶ Bangladesh's main port of entry was unusable for several days due to the many sunken ships blocking the harbor as well as the collapse of local bridges and sea walls.⁷

The decision was made by the U.S. President, in response to a request for foreign aid from the government of Bangladesh, to provide assistance in the form of a Joint Task Force (JTF).⁸ The JTF was a coalition task force with Japanese, Pakistani and British forces.⁹

The desired end state for the operation was passing control of the disaster relief efforts to the Bangladeshi government. Therefore, close coordination with the host nation was a necessity.¹⁰ To this end, the phasing in the operations plan specified the goal of handing over relief operations to the government of Bangladesh in the shortest amount of time possible.¹¹ A multinational relief coordinating committee, with JTF participation, was established in order to coordinate and prioritize relief activities. The government of Bangladesh was in charge of the committee and approved all final decisions.¹²

An important lesson from Operation Sea Angel concerned the relationship between non-military organizations and the JTF. If not for the extensive destruction of the

Bangladeshi infrastructure, other U.S. government agencies (OGAs), such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), international organizations (IOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGO) would have been the most efficient providers of disaster relief.¹³ In the case of Operation Sea Angel, the JTF was most effective when the expertise of OGAs, IOs, and NGOs were used to better understand the local area. NGOs and civilian agencies had a long history of working in Bangladesh and could be relied upon to provide regional expertise and confer legitimacy on the JTF.¹⁴

An additional important aspect of the operation was the utility of sea basing. Although the doctrine of sea basing was still in its infancy for the U.S. Navy, there were numerous advantages gained by exploiting the concept. Limiting the ground force footprint through the use of sea basing helped to dispel rumors that the operation was a prelude to an American base in Bangladesh.¹⁵ Also, basing the force at sea contributed to reducing the health and security risks to U.S. military personnel.¹⁶

Another operation that occurred shortly after Operation Sea Angel was Operation Support Hope in 1994. This disaster relief operation was in response to a man-made humanitarian crisis in Rwanda.¹⁷ The situation in Rwanda was such that the U.S. military was considered to be the only organization capable of responding.¹⁸ The Joint Task Force was constituted to conduct relief operations in order to ease the “immediate suffering of Rwandan refugees”.¹⁹

Due to peace keeping efforts in Somalia, the question of when to use American forces in disaster relief situations was controversial in the U.S. government.²⁰ Ultimately, special care was taken to prevent the JTF from shifting from a disaster relief operation to an operation focused on establishing security within Rwanda.²¹ The Secretary of Defense,

William Perry, stated that U.S. participation was “strictly in the context of the humanitarian effort at the urgent request of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees”.²²

Operation Support Hope also highlighted the benefits and difficulties involved in U.S. military forces working with OGAs, IOs, and NGOs. As with Operation Sea Angel, IOs and NGOs were first on the scene of the crisis in Rwanda and had the most experience in the area. The Task Force Commander, General Schroeder, stated that “There are international agencies that can do humanitarian assistance much better than the military”.²³

Friction was introduced due to the different objectives of the U.S. military and civilian organizations working in the region. Operation Support Hope was focused on completing the operation as rapidly as possible while IOs and NGOs viewed the situation and U.S. military participation as a long term operation.²⁴ Many organizations also felt that the Joint Task Force’s focus on operational protection hampered effectiveness.²⁵

Ultimately, Operation Support Hope was most effective when providing support and logistical capability to the OGA, IO, and NGO relief effort. U.S. aircraft flew 46 percent of relief flights during the operation, compared to United Nations flights which made up the rest.²⁶ Military Sealift Command also provided extensive logistical capability in the form of water purification equipment and the ability to move trucks into Mombassa.²⁷

When the U.S. military forces failed to effectively coordinate with IOs and NGOs, problems arose. In one case, an air drop of relief supplies was executed but was not coordinated with aid agencies and therefore was dropped in the wrong area and caused damage to a banana plantation.²⁸ An after action report for the United States European Command mentions the air drop was not even wanted by the relief agencies.²⁹ More

effective coordination with OGAs, IOs, and NGOs could have contributed to an efficient distribution of relief supplies in the early phases of the operation.

On 26 December 2004 an earthquake off of Southeast Asia produced a tsunami which resulted in the deaths of over 100,000 people in Indonesia, mainly in Aceh Province.³⁰ The massive loss of life and injury, coupled with the almost total destruction of infrastructure, caused the U.S. to respond by sending a Joint Task Force to conduct humanitarian relief and disaster assistance. The operation, which was designated Operation Unified Assistance, was able to incorporate many lessons from disaster relief operations in the past 13 years and also highlighted new areas to improve.

Operation Unified Assistance reiterated the idea that the U.S. military can effectively contribute to large scale disaster relief operations. Although initial estimates of the damage and loss of life suggested a relatively small disaster relief operation would be required, once the actual scope of the damage began to be known it was apparent OGAs, IOs, and NGOs would not be able to provide adequate support and consequently, a large scale JTF was formed.³¹ Ultimately, the operation utilized over 15,000 U.S. personnel, twenty-five ships and over one hundred aviation assets.³²

The ability to provide logistics to relief agencies and for the population was a critical capability for the operation. The Military Sealift Command (MSC) was uniquely suited to utilize the sea lines of communication in order to provide disaster relief supplies. The first MSC ship arrived within 48 hours of the tsunami.³³ Six ships from the Maritime Prepositioning Force participated in the operation.³⁴ MSC was able to provide a significant amount of disaster relief supplies in a relatively short amount of time. In particular, the

forward deployed nature of the Maritime Prepositioning Force offered a significant capability for the operational planner.

Another method utilized to provide support to relief agencies and the population was the deployment of USNS Mercy, a hospital ship. USNS Mercy provided almost 20,000 medical procedures with a staff of over 5,000 military and NGO staff.³⁵ USNS Mercy staff also assisted NGOs on shore by training new hospital staff, which NGO personnel were not able to do since they were manning the hospital at Banda Aceh.³⁶

The positive effect of the USNS Mercy on Operation Unified Assistance was undeniable. However, the deployment highlighted critical issues for future deployments. Since the ship is considered a deployable national asset there was much confusion about who was authorized to deploy the ship. Ultimately, the U.S. President had to order the ship to deploy.³⁷ Another issue was that the ship was severely undermanned shortly before the deployment. Effective coordination with NGOs produced civilian volunteers from hospitals across America, although this led to the obvious difficulties of a large number of civilians working full time on a U.S. military ship.³⁸

The value of sea basing was readily apparent in Operation Unified Assistance. The sea basing in this operation centered on the Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group (CSG) and the previously mentioned MSC ships.³⁹ One of the main advantages of sea basing in Operation Unified Assistance was it significantly lessened the American forces footprint on the island and addressed concerns among the local population that the U.S. was trying to convert Muslims or pave the way for an invasion.⁴⁰ Sea basing was also a significant factor in operational force protection since U.S. forces did not stay ashore for long periods of time.⁴¹

Finally, it is worth noting there were serious problems during the entire operation with communications. There was a desire to keep most communications unclassified in order to facilitate working with coalition partners as well as OGAs and NGOs, who were considered the regional experts.⁴² Most of the U.S. forces had limited non-secure communication capability, which severely hampered communications among all of the participants in the operation.⁴³ Future humanitarian operations will have to maximize non-secure means of communications to successfully synchronize with coalition partners, OGAs, and NGOs.

Operation Lifeline, in October of 2005, was in response to an earthquake in northwest Pakistan. The earthquake claimed over 73,000 lives in an extremely difficult operating environment where the dominating feature was the mountainous terrain.⁴⁴ Approximately 80 percent of the structures collapsed in the provincial capital.⁴⁵ The commander of Expeditionary Strike Group 1 was appointed head of Joint Task Force Disaster Assistance Center Pakistan (DACP PAK), with a force of over 1,200 U.S. military personnel.⁴⁶ As with many disaster relief situations, the decision to commit military forces and establish a Joint Task Force was based upon the massive loss of infrastructure and inability of traditional providers of relief to operate in the environment.

The U.S. military had begun to incorporate lessons learned from previous disaster relief operations by the time of Operation Lifeline and understood the value of integration with OGAs, and to a certain extent with NGOs. Pakistan was unique in that the U.S. Embassy staff in Islamabad was only 20 percent State Department personnel and was already familiar with joint operations.⁴⁷ The U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan commented that the composition of the embassy staff “created close interagency cooperation.”⁴⁸

The close working relationship of the U.S. and Pakistani military also aided with synchronization efforts. Consequently, DAC PAK was able to synchronize with the Pakistani military and leverage the Pakistani's expertise at providing disaster relief in the local area.⁴⁹

The final lesson from operations in Pakistan concerned the function of logistics, specifically U.S. military aviation assets. Operation Lifeline was similar to other disaster relief operations in that the most significant contribution the JTF made was providing logistical support to the host nation. The most important of the logistical capabilities had to do with aviation assets and support. The congressional report to the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations states that the "largest contribution the U.S. military made to the relief effort was the logistical management of the air space and relief operations staged from Chaklala air base".⁵⁰ Helicopters flew over 5,200 sorties and delivered over 14,000 tons of supplies in terrain that was inaccessible by other assets in the JTF.⁵¹ In complex disaster relief crises, the aviation element of logistics for the Joint Task Force is of critical importance.

FUTURE DISASTER RELIEF OPERATIONS IN AFRICA

The newly formed U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) will assume mission responsibility as a Unified Command on 1 October 2008.⁵² The area AFRICOM will be responsible for has a high likelihood of requiring disaster relief operations in the near term future. In 2006, the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance's (OFDA) three largest responses were in Africa and over 60 percent of their funding was allocated to the African region.⁵³ The current humanitarian efforts in Africa and the increased likelihood of future operations have meant AFRICOM will focus on humanitarian assistance programs.⁵⁴

The legal and doctrinal framework for an AFRICOM response to disaster relief has evolved as the U.S. military has become more involved in disaster relief operations over time. The U.S. military participates in foreign humanitarian assistance under Sections 404 and 2561, Title 10, United States Code.^{55, 56} Under these codes the President may direct the Department of Defense to “provide disaster assistance outside the United States”.⁵⁷ Except in emergencies, the response is in concurrence with the Secretary of State.⁵⁸

The National Security Strategy of 2006 emphasized the importance of effective foreign humanitarian assistance in improving governments and reducing threats.⁵⁹ National Security Presidential Directive 44 was issued in 2005 to improve coordination for reconstruction and stabilization of foreign states and identifies the Secretary of State as the focal point for integrating United States Government efforts.⁶⁰ Future disaster relief operations will fall under the concept of stabilization, security, transition and reconstruction (SSTR) operations, which emphasize integration with U.S. government agencies and coordination with IOs and NGOs.^{61, 62}

The current joint doctrine for Foreign Humanitarian Assistance (FHA) outlines in more detail what the Department of Defense’s role will be in disaster relief operations. Disaster relief provided by the U.S. military will be “limited in scope and duration” and will supplement efforts of the host nation and civilian agencies providing relief.⁶³ In the case of the United States Government, the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), under the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has “primary responsibility for the U.S. response in FHA operations”.⁶⁴ Coordination with the host nation, OGAs, IOs, and NGOs is facilitated through the use of humanitarian operation centers (HOC) at the strategic level and civil military operational centers (CMOC) at the operational level.⁶⁵

The Commander of AFRICOM has addressed many of the U.S. interagency issues by proposing a unique command structure. A Department of State official will serve as a command deputy in what is called the Command's Deputy to the Commander for Civil-Military Activities (DCMA).⁶⁶ Numerous other OGA officials will fill positions which are aimed at improving interagency coordination. These include a Development and Humanitarian Assistance Advisor and positions within the Strategy, Plans and Programs Directorate.⁶⁷ It is unclear if these positions will be fully integrated into the command structure or will continue to serve as liaisons to the commander, as in other geographic combatant commands.

One of the significant issues AFRICOM will have to face in large scale disaster relief operations is the integrated planning and coordination with civilian agencies. The traditional organization of the many governmental and non-governmental agencies involved in disaster relief focuses on compromise and consensus.⁶⁸ This reliance on unity of effort has lead to inefficiencies in U.S. military dealings with civilian agencies. Complicating this is the fact that some IOs and NGOs, who may be regional disaster relief experts, are reluctant to work with the U.S. military because they feel the military will dominate the operation or use the operation as an opportunity to gather intelligence.⁶⁹

Another issue facing AFRICOM is a perceived competition for resources among agencies dealing in disaster relief. A recent national defense conference hosted by AFRICOM highlighted this concern among U.S. government agencies. Attendees felt the U.S. military was not a proper conduit of disaster relief. Donors flowing resources through the Department of Defense would deny resources away from other developmental agencies.⁷⁰

COMMON THEMES

Given the operating environment and challenges facing AFRICOM, common operational themes stand out from recent disaster relief operations. These lessons can be grouped into the broad categories of the factor of force, the combination of force and space, the support of OGAs, IOs, and NGOs and coordination with the civilian relief agencies.

The lesson concerning the factor of force deals with the question of when it is appropriate to use a U.S. military force during a disaster relief response. Operations in Bangladesh and Indonesia have shown foreign governments can be hesitant to ask for military involvement in disaster relief operations for a number of cultural and legitimacy issues.^{71, 72} In many cases, civilian agencies are more capable than the U.S. military at understanding the local environment in order to provide relief.⁷³

In general, the U.S. military has been most useful when the scope of the disaster is such that the traditional providers of relief are no longer able to accomplish the objectives of disaster relief operations. In Operations Sea Angel and Unified Assistance, the damage to the local infrastructure was near total. Operation Lifeline responded to a disaster that destroyed virtually all of the medical facilities and roads in extremely difficult terrain.⁷⁴ The requirements of operating in such environments are prohibitively difficult to meet for the usual civilian providers of disaster relief.

A critical lesson related to the combination of force and space is the importance of limiting the size and footprint of the U.S. military in the area of operations. As mentioned before, during Operations Sea Angel and Unified Assistance, it was critical to limit the size of the force in the host nation to maintain the legitimacy of the government and respect regional cultural issues. Often, it is not only the host nation but also the U.S. government

which can be wary of a large U.S. military presence. In the Operation Support Hope case study the use of military force for disaster relief was heavily influenced by recent problems with humanitarian operations in Somalia. A geographic combatant commander will need to address reluctance from the host nation, as well as the U.S. government, to commit a large military force to disaster relief operations. Not addressing these concerns could affect the legitimacy of the operation.

The next lesson from the case studies is that a critical capability for U.S. forces in disaster relief operations is the ability to provide logistical support to relief agencies and the effected population. Recent disaster relief operations show the most effective elements of the Joint Task Force were not traditional combat forces. Instead, logistic units and assets were the most beneficial parts of the U.S. force. Examples include the importance of aviation units accessing remote terrain in Operations Lifeline and Support Hope.⁷⁵ In Operation Unified Assistance, the forward deployed nature of the Military Sealift Command meant that large amounts of supplies could be provided quickly via shortened sea lines of communication.⁷⁶

Another lesson related to logistics is that effective coordination with OGAs, IOs, and NGOs is required to efficiently provide logistical support. Operation Support Hope showed how lack of coordination with OGAs, IOs, and NGOs can hinder logistical support. In Operation Lifeline, the JTF took advantage of preexisting relationships in the U.S. Embassy and with the host nation to better provide support.

Even when an attempt is made at synchronization, friction can be introduced to disaster relief operations when a JTF attempts to synchronize with OGAs, IOs, and NGOs. Case studies in Rwanda and Indonesia showed how lack of synchronization can result from a

number of different factors including different communication technology between military and civilian agencies.

Joint doctrine does address the need to synchronize efforts with civilian organizations through the formation of civil military operations centers (CMOC) and humanitarian operations centers (HOC).^{77, 78} However, due to the advisory nature of the operation centers and the fact that IOs and NGOs are not bound by U.S. military doctrine, effective coordination is not always achieved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

AFRICOM should establish a high threshold with objective criteria defining when U.S. military forces will be utilized for disaster relief operations. Less complex and common disaster relief situations should be left to the traditional providers of relief such as USAID as well as IOs and NGOs. The United Nations (U.N.) addresses this issue by pointing out the need to establish a clear distinction between civil and military humanitarian action.⁷⁹ The U.N. goes further and suggests military forces should only be used as a last resort when a “humanitarian gap” exists because civilian relief agencies are unable to provide assistance.⁸⁰ It has also been proposed by experts in humanitarian assistance that military assets should only be used when they hold a “comparative advantage” over other relief agencies.⁸¹

The threshold for U.S. military forces should include widespread destruction of infrastructure and evidence of an inability of OGAs, IOs, and NGOs to provide disaster relief due to lack of logistical capability. The U.S. civilian agency component of the command structure of AFRICOM should make it possible for OGAs to monitor and provide input to the geographic combatant commander if the threshold has been met to provide military support to disaster relief operations.

Developing a high threshold for military participation in disaster relief operations should alleviate some of the concerns on the part of host nations and traditional providers of disaster relief. OGAs, IOs, and NGOs would not feel as if they were in competition with the U.S. military for humanitarian resources. The fear that the U.S. military uses humanitarian disaster to gather operational intelligence or gain a military advantage would also be alleviated.

The next recommendation is AFRICOM should utilize the sea basing concept whenever possible in disaster relief scenarios. The case studies showed host nations can be wary of U.S. military disaster relief operations and sea-basing would reduce the size of the military footprint in the effected nation. Sea basing would also be more effective for force protection. Many of the regions USAID is providing relief for in Africa are accessible by the sea.⁸² If these regions degenerated into a complex crisis and experienced large scale destruction of infrastructure they would be ideal for sea basing.

Finally, AFRICOM should limit the use of military forces to the support of governmental and non-governmental relief agencies, mainly by providing logistical capability. This is accomplished through extensive coordination with OGAs, IOs, and NGOs. AFRICOM should establish a Standing Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF), staffed by the interagency personnel already on the AFRICOM staff, which has a specialty in disaster relief operations. Although coordination has been attempted in past operations through the use of CMOCs and HOCs, a complaint is that the U.S. military is more concentrated on forming operations centers than improving coordination.⁸³ The integration of other U.S. agency personnel, already on the AFRICOM staff, into the command and

control structure of a Joint Interagency Task Force would more efficiently support OGAs, IOs, and NGOs who have an expertise in disaster relief.

It would also be important to take advantage of the host nation's regional expertise as in Operation Lifeline with the Pakistani military. Although it would not be necessary to integrate the host nation into the JIATF staff, it would be beneficial to establish working relationships prior to a possible disaster. This could be done by participating in specific disaster relief exercises with African countries. AFRICOM could incorporate this into its theater security cooperation programs.

AFRICOM should give the greatest priority to providing logistical capability to efficiently support OGAs, IOs, and NGOs. The focus, in regards to types of military force to allocate to the JIATF, should be aviation and ground logistic units. The case studies showed the ability to provide logistics to OGAs, IOs, and NGOs was the center of gravity for disaster relief operations. Therefore, consideration should be given to prepositioning humanitarian supplies in the AFRICOM theater of operations. This could be done with Military Sealift Command's Maritime Prepositioning Force.⁸⁴

Since the U.S. military force is already stretched thin worldwide, it would be advantageous to use capabilities not used on a regular basis. Operation Unified Assistance showed the benefits of using hospital ships in disaster relief operations. If seldom-used assets are utilized for disaster relief operations then readiness becomes an issue. A way of solving the problem of readiness would be to include seldom used assets in humanitarian assistance programs AFRICOM will be involved in as part of the command's security cooperation activities.⁸⁵

AFRICOM faces many questions related to disaster relief as the command begins to operate on the continent of Africa. When should U.S. military forces be committed to disaster relief operation in a region that has a high potential for requiring humanitarian assistance? Where the force should be based if the decision is made by the United States government to act in a disaster relief situation? What should AFRICOM's relationship be with governmental and non-governmental relief agencies who have been working in Africa for significant periods of time? Answers to these questions can be found in significant disaster relief operations the U.S. military has participated in around the world.

Disaster relief case studies point to three recommendations that AFRICOM should incorporate into disaster relief doctrine. A high threshold should be set for the use of military forces in a disaster relief operation. The concept of sea basing should be utilized as much as possible to limit the size of the ground forces footprint in the affected area. Finally, military forces should be limited to the support of governmental and non-governmental relief agencies, mainly by providing logistical capability.

AFRICOM can ill afford to ignore the lessons from recent disaster relief operations. Case studies have shown that these kinds of operations are complex and require intense coordination among all participants. AFRICOM should focus on the lessons from past operations to better react to a critical mission of the future.

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